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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

'THE ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE
1925

From Henry V to Hamlet'

By

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ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE, 1925

FROM HENRY V TO HAMLET

By HARLEY GRANVILLE-BARKER

Read May 13, 1925

I WANT to speak of what seems to me to have been the crucial period of Shakespeare's development as a dramatist, and to glance at what prompted the crisis and what resulted from it. And if I must seem dogmatic, it is not that I am in love with my dogma, or indeed feel dogmatic at all, but merely that in spending an hour upon a controversial subject one must save time. I shall speak of him, not merely as a dramatist, but primarily as an Elisabethan dramatist; a view too long ignored, though now returning to favour. In fact for an ideal standpoint I would throw myself and you back if I could by not quite three hundred years to be listeners to such a talk as I imagine might have had place—let us say about 1635, at the Pegasus Inn in Cheapside, and at supper time, between three playgoers returned from some performance at the Blackfriars; not perhaps of one of Shakespeare's plays, but of the latest Massinger or Shirley.

The chill shadow of Puritanism was already falling, and within seven years the theatres were to be closed. It was the time of the decadence of Elisabethan drama; though that, no doubt, was a question of contemporary dispute. I will imagine our three playgoers disputing it. Let one of them be elderly, and the two others young; one of these two an enthusiast, and the other—as common a type—a great frequenter of theatres and a greater despiser of them. And after a while the elder might drift—if the supper and the wine and the company were generous I feel sure he *would* drift—into reminiscence of the better time 'before you young blades were born', when Shakespeare and Burbage were the men. It is to such a point of view of Shakespeare's art that I wish I could lead you this afternoon. For from it we could still see him as the topical wit, and he was that; as the successor to Kyd and Marlowe, in a perspective which would give us the contemporary value of that heritage; as the

popular playwright and the provider of effective parts for Burbage, Heminge, Phillips, Field, Pope, and the rest; for he was this too, and upon this must have hung much of his contemporary reputation. Finally, I suspect, we should have to consider him as the dramatist who—his head turned by too much success, maybe—tried to do more with the theatre than the theatre's nature allowed and, for all his reputation, failed. The youngest of the trio, our contemptuous playgoer, would, I feel sure, urge this very smartly. (Had he lately spent 20s., perhaps, upon a nice new copy of the Second Folio? A second-hand copy of the First would have been a better investment for the future.)

'*Hamlet*? Yes, interesting; but I'd sooner read than see it. Can it be a good play then? *Macbeth*, with its elliptical obscurities of language—do you call that poetry? And *King Lear*, with its verbal thundering and lightning, the whole thing as inchoate as the thunderstorm—is this sort of stuff suitable to a theatre?'

In which last objection, of course, most modern critics join; but they are apt to blame the theatre and not Shakespeare for it. We should perhaps have heard his earlier work preferred to his later. Did he, after all, ever do anything more delightful than *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Richard II*? Or his latest liked better than all; the pastoral scenes in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. And our young and contemptuous playgoer—who had, I believe, a career of acrid success in the Long Parliament till Cromwell grew sick of his sophistries—might finally protest that the only play he could really admire was *Troilus and Cressida*. At last the elder man, capturing the talk, would tell them what he thought really happened to Shakespeare the popular playwright at the crux of his career.

'Let me remember. When was it I first saw *Julius Caesar*? About 1600. Yes, thirty-five years ago.'

It is his discourse which, with unavoidable differences, I will try to make mine.

In 1599 Shakespeare produced *Henry V*. He was at a height of success and popularity. He had never looked back since Marlowe died and left him, so to speak, the sceptre of heroic blank verse as a legacy. In *Henry V* he is wielding that sceptre—incomparably and with a difference—but it is that sceptre still. The play no doubt was a contemporary success. But it bears signs, like many successes, of having brought its writer to a 'dead end'. And, standing at Shakespeare's side at that moment (I do not suggest he did anything of the sort himself), one might pertinently have asked: 'In what has the vitality of your work really lain?'

The answer must involve a glance at the development of the whole Elisabethan theatre up to this time. Roughly speaking this has been happening. Within the rather more than twenty years since the building of James Burbage's famous Theatre—*The Theatre*—these stage-players' pranks have become in some opinions a pleasing, an almost respectable calling; out of which, that is to say, people are beginning to make reputation and money. There has developed a school—several schools—of playwrights. There has necessarily developed also a school of actors. This last phenomenon was possibly the more noticeable one to the Elisabethans, though it is in retrospect, of course, the less obvious to us. But let us look into it a little. What players did the earlier dramatists find to draw upon? Foremost in popularity with the public were the clowns. But from the dramatist's point of view they were not very satisfactory actors. Their skill lay in dancing and singing and improvisation; the shackles of set dialogue, as we know, they as often broke as wore. More important recruits for the poetic needs of the plays would be the boys—now growing and grown to be men—the child actors trained by Farrant and his like in such choir schools as Paul's. Delicate, charming, scholarly speakers, we may suppose. Translate their acting at Court or the Blackfriars into the terms of the singing in a good Cathedral choir to-day, and you have approximately the aesthetic effect they made. But they had to face a very different audience in the open public theatres to which the whole unruly town might come. Put this in political terms; it would be the difference between a debate in the House of Lords and an excited election meeting. Then there would be the barn-stormers,^o the actors of all work, who had, with one qualification or another, found a place in this or that company of 'Lords' men'.

We must view the drama of 1580 to 1600 in the light, among others, of these capacities for its interpretation; and particularly in the light of what resulted from the combination of these two last constituents in their response to the demands of the younger poet-dramatists, of whom Marlowe and Shakespeare were the type. For what gave the Theatre its sudden direct hold on the people was surely this newly arisen art of emotional acting. The older plays had not been vehicles for this. If we ask what the acting was like that people found so stirring, there are parallels to-day, though the nearest are not in the theatre. Go to a revivalist meeting in Wales—or, if you prefer, go to the Opera. Elisabethan music did not attempt that frontal assault on our emotions that modern music does (and that modern opera, for a personal confession, mostly fails to do). But here was a rough

equivalent. And if any one recollects, some twenty-five years ago at Covent Garden, Caruso's finish to the first act of *Pagliacci*, I think they can estimate the sort of effect created and the sort of method used by Burbage and Alleyn on the Elisabethan stage. Much else, however, had gone to the making of the complete art of the theatre as it existed in 1600. On the interpretative side, skill in high comedy and the development out of clowning of what we now call 'character' acting. Externally, richer resources for properties and costume; a fair touch of pageantry. But the heroes of the public as of the plays were Burbage and Alleyn and their peers, for they gave their audience music and poetry and popular oratory in one.

Now let us see what Shakespeare's characteristic contributions to the theatre had been. There were the obvious ones; and some not yet perhaps quite so obvious. For there are two sides to Shakespeare the playwright, as there are to most artists, and to most men brought into relations with the public and its appetite (which flatterers call its taste). There was the complaisant side and the daemonic side. His audience demanded exciting stories. He was no great hand at inventing a story, but he borrowed the best. They asked for heroic verse. He could do this with any one, and he did. I always fancy that the immoderate length of *Richard III* is due to the sheer exuberance of the young man put on his mettle to claim the inheritance of the dead Marlowe's mighty line. Euphuism had its vogue still. He could play upon that pipe too very prettily; and *Love's Labour's Lost* is as much homage as satire. But from the very beginning, signs of the daemonic Shakespeare can be seen, the genius bent on having his own way; of the Shakespeare to whom the idea is more than the thing, who cares much for character and little for plot, who cannot indeed touch the stagiest figure of fun without considering it as a human being and giving it life, whether it suits Shakespeare the popular play-provider to do so or not. And sometimes it doesn't.

Look into *Love's Labour's Lost*. The ideas behind the story are exiguous enough, but it is in these that the play dramatically survives. We laugh the play through at the ridiculous Armado; no mockery, not the crudest sort of banter is spared him. But at the end, with one touch of queer dignity, Shakespeare and he make the fine gentlemen of the play, who are mirrors of the fine gentlemen in the audience, look pretty small. Consider Sir Nathaniel the country curate. Mr. Penley in the *Private Secretary* was no greater scandal to the dignity of the Church (though Mr. Penley was too good a comedian not to keep a little dignity in hand) than is Sir Nathaniel attempting to enact

Alexander the Great. But, when he has been laughed off the mimic stage, hear Costard's apology for him to the smart London ladies and gentlemen, his mimic audience :

There, an't shall please you ; a foolish mild man ; an honest man look you, and soon dashed ! He is a marvellous good neighbour, faith, and a very good bowler ; but for Alisander—alas, you see how 'tis, a little o'erparted.

That does not belong to the plot or the fun-making scheme. Nor is it a thing you learn how to do by following any fashion or going to any school of play-writing, to-day's or yesterday's. But here already, in 1591, his age twenty-five, is the true Shakespeare, having his way. Fifty words (not so many) turn Sir Nathaniel the Curate (and Costard too) from a stage puppet to a human being, and send you away from the theatre, not only knowing the man, having, as we say, 'an idea' of the man, but liking him even while you laugh at him, and feeling, moreover, a little kindlier towards the next man you meet in the street who reminds you of him. *This* is the Shakespeare who was finally to people, not his little theatre only, but the whole intellectual world for the next three hundred years with figures of his imagining.

This is the Shakespeare that turns the Romeo of Act I into the Romeo of Act V, and the Mercutio of the Queen Mab speech (charming stuff though it be) into the Mercutio of

No ! 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door ; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve . . .

It is the Shakespeare that recklessly lodged that dynamic human figure of Shylock within the preposterous fairy tale of *The Merchant of Venice*, the Shakespeare that triumphantly made the Falstaff of the speech on Honour and of the scenes of *Henry IV, Part II* out of the old pickpurse of Gadshill (strange that a later inhabitant of Gadshill should have done much the same sort of thing two and a half centuries later with his *Pickwick*). If in fact we are to look for the informing thing, the vital quality in Shakespeare's developing art, it will lie not in the weaving and unravelling of plots, but in some principle behind the plot, by which it seems to move of itself ; and not so much in the writing of great dramatic poetry even, as in this growing power to project character in action.

Now if emotional rhetoric was a new thing to the Elisabethan theatre, this last thing—done as he was doing it—was yet a newer. To-day we can distinguish him in the first stage of his career passing from sketches to full length figures, from the play and the part that is half convention and half a living thing (read the entire Juliet ; not the

Juliet as commonly cut for performance) to the thing that abounds in its own life from first to last. It was not such an easy journey to make; for Shakespeare the daemonic genius had always to strike some sort of a bargain with Shakespeare the popular playwright, who would be content with the finish of *The Taming of the Shrew* or the last Act of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But truly the bolder spirit was justified by success, and went from success to success, from Richard III to Richard II, from Shylock to Falstaff, from Mercutio to Hotspur, from Romeo to Prince Hal.

This, you may protest, is merely to say that he was learning how to write good plays. For is not the chief test of a good play that its characters will come vividly to life when it is acted? It is easier, as we shall see, to call that a truism than to admit all its truth must imply. Make such a comparison, however, between Shakespeare and his contemporaries; set, for instance, Marlowe's Edward II by his Richard II's side, and see if here is not the essential difference between them. Then look closer to where the actual detailed differences lie. How does this vitality manifest itself? Did we not mark it rightly in that little speech of Costard's in *Love's Labour's Lost*? Is not Shakespeare's progress as a playwright very much to be measured by the increase of those suddenly illuminating things that seem to light up not merely the one dramatic moment, but the whole nature of a man, sometimes even the very background of his life? By such things as Prince Hal's famous apostrophe to Falstaff, shamming dead:

Poor Jack, farewell,
I could have better spared a better man.

—As Mr. Justice Shallow's

Barren, barren, barren; beggars all, beggars all, Sir John.
Marry, good air!

—such as the hostess's tale of Falstaff's death:

. . . I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp
as a pen and a' babbled of green fields.

—and old drink-sodden Bardolph's

Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven
or in hell.

Are such things trifles? They are immortal trifles. They should not be torn from their context, and their true context is the acted scene. But are they not the things that give this peculiar quality of life to the plays? And is it not the ever greater abundance of this quality which marks his approach to the mastery of his art?

Shakespeare was learning too, in these years, to adapt the chief convention of his medium—the convention of rhetorical verse—to his own needs. He had also, it is true, the directer one of prose; and he could make a magnificent music of that when he chose. Falstaff certainly lacks nothing of force or fire by being freed from the bonds of metre.

If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked. If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned; if to be fat is to be hated, then Pharoah's lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord, banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins; but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant being as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company: banish not him thy Harry's company: banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

But compare Romeo and Richard II with Hotspur and Prince Hal. Hotspur is set almost entirely within the convention of verse; but how little conventionalized phrasing there is in it. And Prince Hal's turns from prose to verse, with the turns of his character, are made with excellent ease. And the caricature of the convention in Pistol is worth remark.

Shakespeare is working, as most artists will, towards making his medium perfectly malleable, and is developing technical resource which defeats mere technical criticism. He was ever a forthright worker; he would precipitate himself into tight places, and then with extraordinary daring and agility be out of them (think of the second Act of *Othello*, and of the manœuvring of the subplot in *King Lear*). He came to possess, indeed, that combination of judgement and instinct which, serving another end, made the deeds of our young airmen in the War a marvel that their elders by reason alone could neither rival nor explain. And, to further the comparison, Shakespeare was working in the youth of an art, to which such freedom is more allowable. Let us not suppose, though, that, for all their apparently slap-dash ways, these Elizabethan dramatists would not be concerned with the technique of their craft. They had not developed its vocabulary. They did not write books, or have to listen to lectures on the subject; though one may suspect that rare Ben Jonson thumped the tables of the Mermaid pretty hard to this purpose. But by an older and better dispensation the little group of comrades and rivals would bandy sharp personal criticism upon work in the doing with the almost religious fervour—even with the *odium theologicum*—which properly belongs to a living art.

Somewhat thus, then, Shakespeare stood towards the theatre when he set out upon the writing of *Henry V*. What is it, in this play, which disappoints us—which, as I believe, disappointed him—and marks it as the danger-point of his career?

From now on I will but assemble before you, as a counsel might, the facts that I think sustain my view of this artistic crisis through which Shakespeare passed. I do not, of course, attach equal importance to them all. Nor do I pretend that, the truth of one admitted, the truth of another must follow. For, however else Shakespeare's genius worked, it was not upon logical lines, and to put anything about it to that test is almost certainly to be misled.

Well, here he is, an acknowledged master of his craft and in the full flush of success, setting out to write a fine play, a spacious play, with England as its subject, no less a thing. He is now to crown the achievement of the earlier histories and, above all, of the last two, in which he had so 'found himself'. He is to bring that popular favourite Prince Hal to a worthy completion. And to this obligation—though against his formal promise to the public—he sacrifices Falstaff. It is easy to see why. Could Falstaff reform and be brought back into the company of the reformed Henry? No. Once before Shakespeare has hinted to us that the fat knight, if he grow great shall grow less, purge, leave sack and live cleanly. But not a bit of it. *Henry IV, Part II*, when it came, found him more incorrigible than ever. And, had Falstaff made his unauthorized way to France, could Henry's new dignity have survived the old ruffian's ironic comments on it? He had run away with his creator once: better not risk it. So to his now unimpeachable hero Shakespeare has to sacrifice his greatest, his liveliest creation so far. Does the hero reward him? No one could say that Henry is ill-drawn or uninteresting. But, when it comes to the point, there seems to be very little that is dramatically interesting for him to do. Here is a play of action, and here is the perfect man of action. But all the while Shakespeare is apologizing—and directly apologizing—for not being able to make the action effective. Will the audience, for heaven's sake, help him out? One need not attach too much importance to the formal modesty of the prologue.

O pardon! Since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.

This might be merely the plea of privilege that every playwright, ancient or modern, must tacitly make. But when we find the apology

repeated and repeated again, and before Act V most emphatically of all; when we find there the prayer to his audience

. . . to admit the excuse
Of time, of numbers, and due course of things
Which cannot in their huge and proper life
Be here presented—

does it not sound a more than formal confession, and as if Shakespeare had distressfully realized that he had asked his theatre—mistakenly; because it must be mistakenly—for what it could not accomplish?

Turn now to Henry himself. When do we come closest to him? Not surely in the typical moments of the man of action, in

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . .
and upon like occasions. But in the night before Agincourt, when, on the edge of likely disaster, he goes out solitary into the dark and searches his own soul. This is, of course, no new turn to the character. Prince Hal at his wildest has never been a figure of mere fun and bombast. Remember the scenes with his father and with Hotspur. Still, soul-searching is—if one may use such a phrase of Majesty—not his strong suit; and the passage, fine as it is, has the sound of a set piece. It is rhetoric rather than revelation.

In the later speech to Westmoreland:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . .

Henry, set among his fellows, is more himself. But Shakespeare makes practically no further attempt to show us the inner mind of the man. The Henry of the rest of Act IV is the Henry of the play's beginning. While, since for Act V some new aspect of the hero really must be found, we are landed with a jerk (nothing in the character has prepared us for it) into a rollicking love scene. And this well-carpentered piece of work is finished. I daresay it was a success, and the Shakespeare who lived to please, and had to please to live, may have been content with it. But the other, the daring, the creative Shakespeare, who had now known what it was to have Shylock, Mercutio, Hotspur, and Falstaff come to life, and abound in unruly life, under his hands—was he satisfied? No doubt he could have put up as good a defence as many of his editors have obliged him with, both for hero and play, for its epic quality and patriotic purpose. Though had he read in the preface to the admirable Arden edition that—

Conscientious, brave, just, capable and tenacious, Henry stands before us the embodiment of worldly success, and as such he is entitled to our unreserved admiration—

I think he would have smiled wryly. For he was not the poet to find patriotism an excuse for the making of fine phrases. And he knew well enough that neither in the theatre nor in real life is it these 'embodiments of worldly success' that we carry closest in our hearts, or even care to spend an evening with.

No, he had set himself this task, and he carried it through conscientiously and with the credit which is sound workmanship's due. But I detect disappointment with his hero, and—not quite fancifully, I believe—a deeper disillusion with his art and with his ambitious self. So in place of an achievement he was only a lesson to the good. But it was a valuable lesson. He had learnt that for presenting the external pageantry of great events his theatre was no better than a puppet-show; and that though the art of drama might be the art of presenting men in action, your successful man of action did not necessarily make the most interesting of heroes. For behind the action, be the play farce or tragedy, there must be some dramatically significant and fruitful idea, or it will hang lifeless. And this is what is lacking in *Henry V*.

What follows? We next find him writing three comedies, the three mature comedies as they are called: *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*. Let us note one or two things about them.

The dominant characters are women, not men.

In *As You Like It* and in *Much Ado About Nothing* it is almost as if he set out to write the plays in prose, as if he were sick of rhetoric, meant somehow to have an intimate, if a commonplace, medium to work in. But poets write poetry as ducks swim, and, at the first excuse, he drops back into it. And in *Twelfth Night*, the latest of the three, he has returned to his accustomed usage of both prose and verse, though his verse is still finding new freedom.

As usual he borrows his stories, but his treatment of them is now really outrageous. In *As You Like It* it is a mere excuse for him to amuse himself and us in the Forest of Arden; and, when he must wind it up somehow, he does so with a perfunctoriness which makes the part of Jaques de Bois, introduced to that end, one of the laughing-stocks of the theatre. In *Much Ado* he lets it turn to ridicule; the end of the Claudio-Hero theme is cynically silly. In *Twelfth Night* he is a little more conscientious. Malvolio and his tormentors carry it away to the utter despite of Orsino and his high romance; but Viola holds her own. The value of *Much Ado* lies in the characters of Benedick and Beatrice and Dogberry, which are Shakespeare's arbitrary additions to the story. And in *As You Like It*, if Orlando and Rosalind are the story's protagonists (which Jaques and Touch-

stone certainly are not), yet the story itself may stand still while he develops them ; and thankful we are that it should.

We need not insist upon the peculiarity of the three titles, though one is tempted to. *As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing, What You Will!* As if they and the things they ostensibly stood for were bones thrown to the dogs of the audience, that wanted their plot and their ear-tickling jokes. Well, let them have it. Shakespeare meanwhile is doing what *he* will, and what he can do as no one else can, creating character, revealing character.

And then he finds his manly subject again in *Julius Caesar*, in that great theme of Rome and the old Roman world, which makes the matter of the English Histories seem parochial. Of what significance it must have been to any imaginative Englishman of that age, with a new world of discovery, its chances and rivalries, its matter for thought and dreams opening up to him ! Shakespeare was to return to Rome and the thought of Rome again and yet again ; and he was never to return in thought—if he did in subject—to the narrower horizons. But note two things about *Julius Caesar*. We have no complaints of the inadequacy of his stage to the representing of the Senate or the battlefield of Philippi. On the contrary, he trusts in his fourth and fifth Acts to one of the oldest and simplest of Elizabethan conventions, the confronting upon the stage of two whole armies, symbolized by Generals, their standard-bearers and drummers. And whom does he choose as hero ? Not Caesar himself, the triumphant, though doomed, man of action ; but Brutus the philosopher, and the man, who for all his wisdom, invariably does the wrong thing. Brutus proves a not quite satisfactory dramatic hero. He is too unemotional, not impulsive enough ; and Shakespeare, taking much of him ready made from Plutarch, never quite fathoms his stoicism. And first Cassius runs away with the play and then Mark Antony. When a character springs to life now Shakespeare is not going to refuse him his chance. Still he resolutely comes back to the developing of Brutus. And his care is not for what his hero does, which is merely disastrous, but what he *is* ; for this now to Shakespeare is the dramatic thing, and the essential thing.

Thou seest the world Voluminius, how it goes ;
Our enemies have beat us to the pit . . .

Countrymen,

My heart doth joy that yet in all my life,
I found no man but he was true to me.
I shall have glory by this losing day,
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest^d shall attain unto.

If *Henry V* was the danger-point, *Julius Caesar* is the turning-point of Shakespeare's career.

And he is now rapidly bringing his verse to its dramatic perfection, is finally forming it into the supple and subtle instrument he needed. He had seldom, in trying to give it conversational currency, fallen into the pit—from which some of his contemporaries hardly emerged—of making it ten-syllabled prose. Rarely, rarely does one find such a line. Rhetoric was to be preferred to that, for rhetoric at least lifted drama to the higher emotional plane, except upon which it was hard to hold his audience in illusion. But here he is relegating rhetoric to its proper dramatic place. Cassius is rhetorical by disposition; Antony because it suits his purpose. Shakespeare will bring his verse to a greater—and to a stranger—perfection yet. But from now on it is ever more a ductile and transparent medium, no bar either to the easy progress of a scene or to intimacy with a character.

But as the study of Brutus draws to an end do not the accents change a little? He is brooding on the issue of the coming battle.

O that a man might know
The end of this day's business ere it come;
'But it sufficeth that the day will end
And then the end is known.

Does not that now echo a more familiar voice?

If it be now, tis not to come; if it be not to come it will be now;
if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all; since no man
has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

It is indeed the voice of Hamlet. And here was to be his next task. And here, not with *Henry V*, his crowning achievement.

It has been often enough remarked that Shakespeare had been making attempts at *Hamlet* all his playwright's life. We find a young euphuistic Hamlet in the first Act of *Romeo*, we find him in *Richard II*, and an impatient touch of him in *Jaques*. But now at last the daring, the inspired partner in this dramatic firm once and fully and for all has his way with the amenable, politic play-provider. Yet, looking at it in the light of its success, do we realize what a breaking of bounds it was? By foot-rule criticism the thing has every fault. A play should be founded upon significant action; and this is about a man who never can make up his mind what to do, who, when he does do anything, does it by mistake. The story is interesting enough, and the device of the play within a play is a well-seasoned one. But the plot, as a plot, is worked out with scandalous ineptitude. At the play's most critical period the hero is absent from

the stage for forty minutes, and the final tragedy is brought about by a precipitate and inartistic holocaust. And not only does Hamlet moralize about everything under the sun, but the rest of the characters—even the wretched Rosencrantz—follow his example upon the least excuse; and the whole thing is spun out to an intolerable length.

But the play was a success. Shakespeare the poet could have a good laugh at Shakespeare the popular playwright about that. And it has been the world's most consistently successful play ever since. And I think we can hear Shakespeare, the poet, saying, 'Yes, I know now what my theatre can do and what it can't. I know at least what I can do. Agincourt and its heroic swashbuckling—no! The stoic Brutus with his intellectual struggles? That was better, though it made hard going. But the passionate, suffering inner consciousness of man, his spiritual struggles and triumphs and defeats in his impact with an uncomprehending world—this may seem the most utterly unfit subject for such a crowded, noisy, vulgar place as the theatre; yet this is what I can make comprehensible, here is what I can do with my art.' And where now is that fine upstanding gentleman, Henry V? He is still at hand, and still commands our unreserved admiration. But his name is Fortinbras, and he is often (though he shouldn't be) cut out of the play altogether.

Hamlet is the triumph of dramatic idea over dramatic action and of character over plot. Shakespeare—grant him the conventions of his stage, with the intimate value they give to the soliloquy and to the emotional privileges and demands of poetry—has now found the perfectly expressive character. The play in every circumstance, and Hamlet himself in every quality and defect, seem to answer the playwright's need. He has found, moreover, perfect ease of expression. Verse, as he has now released it from its strictness, losing nothing of its rhythm, cannot, one would think, fall more aptly to the uses of dialogue, say, than in the scenes with Horatio and Marcellus, or to the direct expression of intimate emotion than in the soliloquy beginning

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here . . . ?

And we may note in passing that if in *Henry V* he was concerned with the disabilities of his stage, he now takes a chance of commenting on the art of acting, the more important matter of the two. Further, that while the effect of the play within a play is greatly strengthened by letting the mimic play be of an older fashion (for thus there is less

If *Henry V* was the danger-point, *Julius Caesar* is the turning-point of Shakespeare's career.

And he is now rapidly bringing his verse to its dramatic perfection, is finally forming it into the supple and subtle instrument he needed. He had seldom, in trying to give it conversational currency, fallen into the pit—from which some of his contemporaries hardly emerged—of making it ten-syllabled prose. Rarely, rarely does one find such a line. Rhetoric was to be preferred to that, for rhetoric at least lifted drama to the higher emotional plane, except upon which it was hard to hold his audience in illusion. But here he is relegating rhetoric to its proper dramatic place. Cassius is rhetorical by disposition; Antony because it suits his purpose. Shakespeare will bring his verse to a greater—and to a stranger—perfection yet. But from now on it is ever more a ductile and transparent medium, no bar either to the easy progress of a scene or to intimacy with a character.

But as the study of Brutus draws to an end do not the accents change a little? He is brooding on the issue of the coming battle.

O that a man might know
The end of this day's business ere it come;
'But it sufficeth that the day will end
And then the end is known.

Does not that now echo a more familiar voice?

If it be now, tis not to come; if it be not to come it will be now;
if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all; since no man
has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

It is indeed the voice of Hamlet. And here was to be his next task. And here, not with *Henry V*, his crowning achievement.

It has been often enough remarked that Shakespeare had been making attempts at *Hamlet* all his playwright's life. We find a young euphuistic Hamlet in the first Act of *Romeo*, we find him in *Richard II*, and an impatient touch of him in *Jaques*. But now at last the daring, the inspired partner in this dramatic firm once and fully and for all has his way with the amenable, politic play-provider. Yet, looking at it in the light of its success, do we realize what a breaking of bounds it was? By foot-rule criticism the thing has every fault. A play should be founded upon significant action; and this is about a man who never can make up his mind what to do, who, when he does do anything, does it by mistake. The story is interesting enough, and the device of the play within a play is a well-seasoned one. But the plot, as a plot, is worked out with scandalous ineptitude. At the play's most critical period the hero is absent from

the stage for forty minutes, and the final tragedy is brought about by a precipitate and inartistic holocaust. And not only does Hamlet moralize about everything under the sun, but the rest of the characters—even the wretched Rosencrantz—follow his example upon the least excuse; and the whole thing is spun out to an intolerable length.

But the play was a success. Shakespeare the poet could have a good laugh at Shakespeare the popular playwright about that. And it has been the world's most consistently successful play ever since. And I think we can hear Shakespeare, the poet, saying, 'Yes, I know now what my theatre can do and what it can't. I know at least what I can do. Agincourt and its heroic swashbuckling—no! The stoic Brutus with his intellectual struggles? That was better, though it made hard going. But the passionate, suffering inner consciousness of man, his spiritual struggles and triumphs and defeats in his impact with an uncomprehending world—this may seem the most utterly unfit subject for such a crowded, noisy, vulgar place as the theatre; yet this is what I can make comprehensible, here is what I can do with my art.' And where now is that fine upstanding gentleman, Henry V? He is still at hand, and still commands our unreserved admiration. But his name is Fortinbras, and he is often (though he shouldn't be) cut out of the play altogether.

Hamlet is the triumph of dramatic idea over dramatic action and of character over plot. Shakespeare—grant him the conventions of his stage, with the intimate value they give to the soliloquy and to the emotional privileges and demands of poetry—has now found the perfectly expressive character. The play in every circumstance, and Hamlet himself in every quality and defect, seem to answer the playwright's need. He has found, moreover, perfect ease of expression. Verse, as he has now released it from its strictness, losing nothing of its rhythm, cannot, one would think, fall more aptly to the uses of dialogue, say, than in the scenes with Horatio and Marcellus, or to the direct expression of intimate emotion than in the soliloquy beginning

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here . . . ?

And we may note in passing that if in *Henry V* he was concerned with the disabilities of his stage, he now takes a chance of commenting on the art of acting, the more important matter of the two. Further, that while the effect of the play within a play is greatly strengthened by letting the mimic play be of an older fashion (for thus there is less

disturbance of the illusion created by the play of *Hamlet* which we are watching), he, in the very midst of his new-fashioned triumph, makes opportunity for a tribute to such men as were masters when he was but a prentice to his work. He has Hamlet speak of the play which was 'caviare to the general', but of

... an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine.

How gracious a thing to do!

Shakespeare has written his masterpiece. What is to happen next? Will he try to repeat his success, or will he fall back upon amusing himself with his work? His restless genius lets him do neither. As becomes a great piece of dramatic art, *Hamlet* is too vital to be perfect; and he knows this, and it is evident that he submitted himself to criticism, his own, or other people's, or both. It was certainly much too long (I think it must always have been cut for ordinary performances). It does lack form; the knotting of its plot is cut rather than unravelled; and the other characters do many of them suffer from being written too much from Hamlet's point of view. Is this why in *Measure for Measure*, which probably was his next play, we find Shakespeare confining himself within the bounds of a symmetrical story, done at normal length? But we find too, I think, that for all the beauty and ruthless wisdom of the play, he is not working happily. And in doing his duty by the plot, his characters have to suffer violence at the end. Next comes *Othello*. Dr. Bradley calls it the most masterly of the tragedies in the point of construction. But now Shakespeare is obviously determined not to let himself be cramped by plot in the working out of character. Nor is there an introspective hero to outbalance the play. He has another device—Iago's quite inhuman cunning—for letting us learn the inwardness of *Othello*. But he had, we see, to make a heroic effort to keep it a normal length. If he were not so successful one would take leave to call it an impudent effort; for as critic after critic has noted, and as one would think anybody of common sense among the audience could see for themselves, the compressions round about Act II make the whole plot impossible; there never *was* any moment when Desdemona could have been guilty of adultery with Cassio, and Othello must have known it. Shakespeare knew though, that common sense was the last faculty to be exercised in the theatre; or, to put it more advisedly, he knew that, once away from watches and clocks, we appreciate the relation of events rather by the intensity of the experiences which unite or divide them in our minds than by

any arithmetical process. 'Short time' and 'long time' is less a dramatic device than a psychological commonplace—as most good dramatic devices are.

But he was now after more than constructional compression and time-saving. He had opened up for himself a very complex artistic issue. Drama was to lie only formally in the external action, was to consist of the revelation of character and of the inevitable clashes between the natures of men. And even behind these there would be the struggle within a man's own nature; and the combatant powers there must be dramatized. (A living play is like life itself in this: each part of it is of the same nature as the whole, and partakes of the power of the whole.)

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.

This is a recipe for ~~tragedy~~. Brutus is speaking, but it might well be Macbeth. With Brutus the problem of dramatizing this insurrection had been mainly avoided. In *Hamlet* it seemed to solve itself; but one would not always happen upon so naturally histrionic a character. In *Othello* the problem is solved, as we have seen, by personifying the power of evil—and Shakespeare was a good Manichæan—in Iago. And in *Macbeth* he finds himself on the track of the same solution, with Lady Macbeth for an Iago. But he turns aside from the danger of self-imitation, somewhat to the truncating of her character.

And now, I think, the issue can be defined. These people of his imagining had to be made to show us their innermost selves, and to show us things in themselves of which they were not themselves wholly conscious. Further, the physical and moral atmosphere in which they move, and its effect on them, will be of importance. And all this apart from the telling of the story and the outward contest! Yet he can look for no help worth speaking of but from interpretative acting. Indeed, to what else could he look? Scenery, in the illusionary sense, he had none. Pageantry may be very well on occasion, but it is apt to leave your drama precisely where it found it. He had nothing but the spoken word. But he could not let his characters dissipate the audience's interest in themselves with long descriptions of outward things. While, if for intimate revelation the soliloquy has been till now, and must always be, a great resource, too

many soliloquies do undoubtedly relax the tension and weaken the structure of a play. And I think we may notice that from *Othello* onwards they are either shorter or more sparingly used. No; he has to fall back on dialogue, and on short-range hard-hitting dialogue, if his characters are to seem to hold each other's attention or are to hold the audience's upon these not very simple questions. He has done with passages of rocket-like rhetoric, which so obviously soar over the person they are addressed to for a landing in the back of the gallery (though Shakespeare the popular playwright must still be allowed one or two, that a scene may be rounded off in the recognized way). Thus the physical conditions of his theatre, combined with the needs of his art as he now perceives them, drive him to depend for story-telling, character-building, and scene-painting upon the art of the actor alone. Moreover—here is the point—for brevity's sake and for the sake of the tenseness, by which alone an audience can be held in the bonds of illusion, he must find some formula of dramatic speech into which these three things can be wrought, all three together.

It is in *Macbeth* that he seems most directly to face this problem; how he solves it remains his secret. Maeterlinck, in a preface to his own translation of the play, gives a masterly analysis of the effect created. I wish I could quote it at length. But this is his summing up:

À sa surface flotte le dialogue nécessaire à l'action. Il semble le seul qu'entendent les oreilles; mais en réalité c'est l'autre parole qu'écoute notre instinct, notre sensibilité inconsciente, notre âme si l'on veut; et si les mots extérieurs nous atteignent plus profondément qu'en nul autre poète, c'est qu'une plus grande foule de puissances cachées les supporte.

And he remarks that throughout the play we find practically no 'expressions mortes'.

But that is not to explain, of course, how lines are written which—in their place—will have the magic of

Light thickens,
And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood.

or the power—though it seems, and is, a line a child might write—of

It will have blood: they say blood will have blood.

Or that can give the effect—really one cannot remove this from its place—of Macduff's

He has no children.

There is, finally, no explaining the marvel of the sleep-walking

scene (if only actors would not try to make it more of a marvel and so make it less !), in which Lady Macbeth speaks but sixteen sentences, of which the most distinctive are merely such simplicities as

Hell is murky.

as

The Thane of Fife had a wife ; where is she now ?

as

All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

(‘ Little ’ hand ! Mark its placing in the sentence and its significance. One may divine touches like that.)

Here then is a secret that Shakespeare never lost, and that no one else has ever found. It is during the period of his work, which covers *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, that he wields the magic of it most potently. But the spell is not fully operative—this we must always remember—unless we are within the charmed circle of the play itself. And when Bradley says, and surely says rightly, that *Lear*’s last speech—

And my poor fool is hang’d ! No, no ; no life !
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
 And thou no breath at all ? Thou’lt come no more,
 Never, never, never, never, never !
 Pray you, undo this button ; thank you, sir,
 Do you see this ? Look on her, look, her lips,
 Look there, look there !

—leaves us upon the topmost pinnacles of poetry, people who cannot transport themselves into the magic world of the living play must wonder what on earth he means.

Whatever is there in Antony’s

I am dying, Egypt, dying ; only
 I here importune death a while, until
 Of many thousand kisses the poor last
 I lay upon thy lips.

Or—as she holds the asp to her—in *Cleopatra*’s failing

Peace, peace !
 Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
 That sucks the nurse asleep ?

And, returning to *Macbeth*, can we even account for the full effect of such passages as the familiar

I have liv’d long enough : my way of life
 Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf ;

or

To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow . . . ?

Shakespeare keeps his secret.

Macbeth is the shortest of the tragedies: even could we restore the probable mutilations I expect it would still be the shortest. It is the most concentrated, the most stripped and stark. In spite of all the circumstances of its form it comes, as has been said, the nearest to Greek tragedy. A last look at it gives us the figures of Macbeth and his wife carved, monumental and aloof, as if Sophocles had been at them. Was it a success? It was given one or more Court performances. James I, with all his faults, had a taste for good drama; or if he only pretended to one, it would, for me, be a pardonable piece of snobbery. Still, it is significant that the Folio editors found nothing but a text which Middleton had been called in to enliven with song and dance.

But now note that for his next task our reckless genius flings off to the very opposite extreme. In *King Lear* he provides himself with a doubled plot, whose working out would leave him with a longer play than *Hamlet*; and from this mischance he saves himself only by the most heroic measures. Moreover, in *Lear* himself he finds a character who runs away with him as no other has done yet. It is the play of his widest outlook. In *Julius Caesar* he thought he was taking a world view. But he stood at Plutarch's side and perhaps did not understand all he saw. This is his own vision; and from this mountain top what we should now call his social conscience searches widest. Anatole France, speaking of great men, has another word for it.

La pitié, voyez vous, M. le Professeur, c'est le fond même du génie.

And if Shakespeare had looked into his new edition of the Bible he would have found in a pertinent passage yet another word freshly restored there, the word 'charity'. By this test, here is his greatest play.

How does he marshal his resources?

The play starts off disciplined and conventional, promising to be as 'Greek' as *Macbeth* has been. But in the development of *Lear* himself—and to this for a time everything gives way and everything contributes—Shakespeare soon breaks all bounds. He rallies every stage device he can think of: even the now old-fashioned figure of the Fool is turned to account—and to what account! But above all, his theme requires that he shall relate *Lear* to the crude world we live in, and to the rigours of that world as it may fall on rich and

poor alike—as it must fall, crushingly for his purpose, upon the proud old tyrant himself. He needs that storm, as he needed the mob in *Caesar*, the ghost in *Hamlet*, or the personified evil of Iago. How does he create it? We are far from the Chorus' apologetics of *Henry V* for what the stage could *not* provide. We are far even from the technique of *Julius Caesar*, where Cicero, Cassius, and Casca are set to describe at length, though little to the advancement of the play, the tempest that heralded the great murder. Shakespeare is for bolder methods now. He turns one character, Edgar, in his disguise as a wandering, naked, half-witted beggar, into a veritable piece of scene-painting of the barren, inhospitable heath. And for the storm itself, he shows it us in its full play as a reflection of that greater storm which rages in the mind of Lear—of anger, terror, pity, remorse—lightening and darkening it as a storm does the sky, and finally blasting it altogether. For *that* storm, as Shakespeare knows now, is the really dramatic thing; moreover it is the only thing that his art can directly and satisfactorily present. To say no more of it than this, here is a marvellous piece of stagecraft, the finest and most significant single thing he ever did—and some of the best critics have decided that in itself it makes the play impossible for the stage!

At which stumbling-block of a paradox we may end this journey. We need not glance on towards *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is in some ways the most perfect, and altogether, I think, the most finely spacious piece of play-making he ever did; nor to *Coriolanus*, where he managed at last to make his 'man of action' dramatically effective; nor to the latest romances, fruits of a well-earned and tolerant repose.

But *is* 'King Lear' unfitted for the stage and so a failure? We cannot turn the question by condemning the theatre itself. A play written to be acted, which cannot be effectively acted, is a failure. What should we say of a symphony which no orchestra could play? And the answer to this question will, as I contend, involve, though with a difference, all these greater plays that we have been considering. The question will indeed become: did Shakespeare, when with *Henry V* he came to the end of all he could find to his purpose in the technique of the drama as his contemporaries and masters understood it, when, passing over that bridge which is *Julius Caesar*, he found in the working out of *Hamlet* the technique best suited to his genius, did he then and thereafter take the wrong road? One had better not be too ready with a straight Yes or No. Frankly, I am for Shakespeare the playwright and Yes. If you are for Shakespeare the playwright, what other answer can there be? But much critical

authority—though it will not quite say No—is still apt to imply it. Through all the important appreciation of his greater work there flows an undercurrent of something very like resentment that he should have been so ill-advised, so inconsiderate as to write it for the theatre at all. And if some of those ingenious contrivers on his behalf of ‘short time’ and ‘long time’ could bring that useful system into a sort of retrospective operation in real life that would abolish the three hundred odd years which separates them from him, could they meet him for a talk during that crisis in his career, happen on him, for instance, just when he was discerning what the working out of the theme of *Hamlet* was to involve, I fancy they would advise him in all friendliness that the subject really was not suitable for a play. Had he asked in return what form, then, he had better cast it in (and it would be a fair question): well, there is the Platonic dialogue; there is the example of Milton turning deliberately from drama to the epic; and Goethe could be held up to him as an awful warning. Beethoven was surely a wiser man. He wrote symphonies in which to enshrine such tremendous emotions; and from him I suppose are descended the great dramatic poets we choose rather to listen to to-day. To which Shakespeare might answer that his Elisabethans felt the need and responded to the art of personal expression more than we do, whose minds are full of science and machinery and of all sorts of things, actual and speculative, that cannot be reduced to terms of human emotion. ‘Though can they not be?’ he might add, ‘and must they not be at any rate brought within the range of it, if you are really to comprehend them?’ He might even be able to refer to a remark which that sympathetic Frenchman, Monsieur André Maurois, has let fall lately in a current book of his—in no way about the theatre, and truly it is written in particular about the French—concerning the universal ‘besoin de mimer’. Monsieur Maurois sees this need of physical expression as the sign of a well-balanced being. A mind isolated from the body, which should be its reflection and its picturing, will be no more effective, he says, than a bird trying to fly in the ether instead of in the air. And after all, Shakespeare might argue, the final test to which everything in the world, great or small, good or evil, must be brought is its effect upon man himself; not upon your economic man, your democratic man, your man-in-the-street, nor any other of the abstractions which Governments and able editors are now concerned with, but upon that strange mixture of thought, appetite, and immortal soul—‘a poor forked animal he may be, but I make my king own to brotherhood with him’. ‘And the claim of this Drama of mine’, he would say,

‘as I have now evolved it, is to bring you into immediate and intimate contact with that man as he essentially *is*, in an *ever present tense*. What other art can do this as mine can?’

That is a fine claim, no doubt; but the practical question remains whether, considering the limits of time and all the other limits and imperfections of the theatre itself, considering its motley mixture of an audience of poor forked animals and kings, considering not least the limitations and imperfections of the actors themselves—does the dramatist seriously expect a company of these actors, decked in borrowed clothes and borrowed passions, strutting the bare boards for an hour or so, to compass these tasks he has set them?

To which Mr. Shakespeare, for all his famed gentleness, might reply rather tartly: ‘My dear sir, I was an actor myself. I was not a very good one; that was because I could not give my whole mind to it, for the writing of even such a trifle as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* takes it out of a man. But I know a good deal more of the possibilities of the art of acting than you do; and am I likely to have been so inconsiderate and so foolish as to risk the success of any play by setting its actors tasks that they could *not* perform?’

Excellent repartee; but it still does not settle the question. It is absurd to suppose that such a restless and daring genius would check himself in full career to ask whether Burbage and his fellows could do well with this and that sort of scene or not. Without doubt Shakespeare imagined effects, which never were fully achieved in his theatre. But there is a great gulf fixed between this admission and saying that he imagined effects that never could be achieved, saying, in fact, that he ceased altogether to write in the terms of the art he had mastered. Genius is often a destructive force, and the question is a fair one, and we may press it: did Shakespeare in his greatest work enlarge, or trying to enlarge, did he only shatter his medium? Yet before we credit this, think of the masters of other arts—of music especially—whose most mature work was received at best with the respect to which earlier success had entitled them, but with the protest that really these Ninth Symphonies and these music dramas were but negations of music. But what difficulty do we find in appreciating them now?

Posterity’s answer, as given to the great revolutionary masters of music, has been, by one chance and another, denied to Shakespeare, for these greater plays have hardly yet been put to full theatrical proof. To begin with, the theatre for which he wrote was itself undergoing one revolutionary change even before he ceased writing for it; it was shifting from outdoors in. To compare the effect of this upon his plays to the bringing of the *Agamemnon* into

the back drawing-room would be an exaggeration, but with a spice of truth in it. Then came suppression of the theatres; tradition was broken, its thread lost, and more was lost than this. Contemporary evidence points to it, even if study of Restoration drama did not. We must always question very closely the testimony of people who mourn the 'good old times', especially the good old times of the drama. No performances are better than those of our earliest recollection; and I suppose it follows that the best of all must be those we never saw. (These, however, are the actor's means to immortality; so let us not grudge them to him.) But when the speakers in the dialogue *Historia Histrionica* in 1699, looking back sixty years, refer to the actors of the King's Company, which was Shakespeare's, as having been 'grave and sober men, living in reputation', it is likely to be the truth; for there is confirmation of it. Heminge and Condell were two of them. Does not the introduction to the First Folio reflect as much gravity and sobriety as you like? Consider, too, that for fifty years here had been a guild (that best describes it) of great renown, with many privileges, and attached to the Court. No women were admitted; and this, at the time (and even now perhaps) would make for its greater gravity. Its younger recruits were the boy apprentices, thoroughly and severely trained from their childhood. It was a body made to perpetuate tradition. But this first chance to come abreast with Shakespeare went. Then followed the demoralization of the Restoration period. Betterton did much to rescue the theatre, but he developed a more Augustan tradition, which dominated the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century. This was a time, too, of the mutilation of texts in the theatre, though scholars were restoring them in the study; also of Shakespeare by flashes of lightning, those flashes of lightning that are apt to leave us in deeper darkness between times. Nineteenth-century scholarship suffered from a surfeit of Shakespeare as philosopher, Shakespeare as mystic, as cryptogrammatic historian, as this and that, and as somebody else altogether. And the nineteenth century theatre suffered from the nineteenth century. Till at last it has seemed but common sense to return to Shakespeare as playwright, and even, for a fresh start, to Shakespeare as Elizabethan playwright. Upon which basis we have within these last five-and-twenty years largely relaid the foundations of our study of him. For this latter-day pioneering we have to thank scholars and men of the theatre both, men of diverse, not to say antagonistic, minds, methods, and standpoints. Mr. William Poel, with a fine fanaticism, set himself to show us the Elizabethan stage as it was. Dr. Pollard

put us on the track of prompt-books. Dr. Chambers, Sir Israel Gollancz (if in his presence I may name him), Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Dover Wilson—we are in debt to many. And one I will more particularly name; William Archer, whose death five months ago was a bitter blow to his friends and a heavy loss to the causes he loved and served. And he loved the theatre of the past—though at times he might dissemble his love—not less because he felt the theatre of the present needed his watchful praise and criticism more. To this present question he brought industry and knowledge, and to his writings on it a generosity of judgement, which was only to be chilled by his intolerance of slovenliness and humbug; in fact, to this, as to all his work, he brought—and no man can bring other—the standards by which he lived, of constancy and truth.

We have set ourselves, then, for a fresh start, to see Shakespeare the playwright as his contemporaries—as my old playgoer of 1635, whom I fear I have been forgetting, whom I will now finally forget—saw him. But even so we must not narrow our view. More is involved than the mere staging of his plays, than the question whether they must be acted in a reproduction of the Globe Theatre or may be decked out in all the latest trimmings—which question, incidentally, has surely, by this, been argued out. We know well enough what the Elisabethan stage was like. We do not know fully all the effects, that could be gained on it, for only experiment will show us. Such experimenting, therefore, will always be valuable. But surely the principle can be agreed upon that, whether or no one can ever successfully place a work of art in surroundings for which it was not intended, at least one must not submit it to conditions which are positively antagonistic to its technique and its spirit. Such an agreement involves, in practice, for the staging of Shakespeare—first, from the audience, as much historical sense as they can cultivate without it choking the springs of their spontaneous enjoyment; next, that the producer distinguish between the essentials and the incidentals of the play's art. Many even of its essentials may be closely knit to the Elisabethan stage. But curtains are at most a background; and, for any play in any sort of theatre, scenery that pretends to be more sins even against its own nature. Further, if my contention of to-day be allowed, Shakespeare's progress in his art had involved an ever greater concentration and reliance upon effects that could only be produced by the art that is irrevocably wedded to the playwright's—and was largely in this case his own incidental creation—the art of interpretative acting.

And it is in this aspect—of the demands which his greatest work

makes upon acting according to the privileges which the technique he evolved bestows upon it—that his art has not yet, I think, been either very fruitfully studied or illustrated. Nor, for the historical reasons I have given, do I see how it well could have been. Nor is the path to its studying very easy even now. There are gleams of light along it, but only gleams. From the scholar's side we had, a generation ago, Moulton's *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*; the work of a powerful mind, a little apt in the excess of its power to break its subject in pieces and remould it as stern logic requires, but a book nevertheless which does elucidate some of the fundamental things in which Shakespeare's art abides. When Dr. Bradley's masterly *Shakespearean Tragedy* was given us—this was a bright gleam, though it surprised people a little to find an Oxford professor for whom not only was poetry poetry, but plays were plays. Nowadays, however, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch takes lucky Cambridge men for delightful picnics (may one so call them?) in the sunny meads of literature, dramatic and other. And we even find him publicly confessing that he stage-managed a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* a few years ago and learned a lot about the play in the process. And if this is the first the Chancellor of that dignified University hears of such a shameful fact, I hope that he hears it unmoved.

There is always a danger, however, that the scholar, approaching a play from its histrionic standpoint, may trip himself up over some simple snag. This is unfortunate and unfair; for after all it is a very proper way of approach. But the drama is an old art; it cannot be wholly reduced to the terms of the printed page. To printer and publisher and editor it bows with gratitude. Where would Shakespeare be to-day without them? But much of its practice, and in particular on its histrionic side, can only be handed down from master to pupil in the traditional way, as other arts and mysteries are. But in this present case and at the present time the artists fail us too, I fear. Their individual excellence is not in question, but that opportunity for constant collaboration which is the theatre's peculiar need, by which tradition is formed and preserved. We have no care for the traditions of our theatre.¹ Within my own day one school of Shakespearian acting

¹ Something is, I believe, being done to preserve the beauty of English speech; gramophone records of it are now kept at the British Museum. How like the time! Have they a record, I wonder, of the most beautiful piece of speaking I ever heard, Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson's 'Buckingham's Farewell' in *Henry VIII*? I have been waiting for thirty years and more to hear it again. But he has never played the part again, has never had the chance. Were we so rich in such talent that we could afford to let it be spent at large? And we

has perished ; it was not a very good one, but it had its own virtues. The present attempts at a new one are being made under conditions that cannot at any rate make it fit for the task we are discussing now. I would not say one word in discouragement of the efforts of the hard-worked young men and women who gallantly fly the flag and have the trumpet blown for them at Stratford-on-Avon and the Old Vic. and elsewhere. Theirs is a very necessary task. But it is conditioned by the fact that they must be constantly providing a three-hours' entertainment for their audience. To that overriding necessity everything else must give way. Now there are many plays—plays of Shakespeare's too—that fulfil that condition very well. Act them, if not a little better, then a little worse, and no great harm is done. But these five great tragedies do not come into that category. Viewed as an evening's entertainment '*King Lear*' is a foredoomed failure, even as Beethoven's great Mass and Bach's Matthew Passion would be. For it comes, as they come, into another category of art altogether ; it is not the art that by perfect and pretty performance will charm and soothe us, but that which, in the classic phrase, purges by pity and terror. We don't expect to enjoy the Mass as we do *The Mikado*, or even as we may enjoy a Mozart sonata. There is as much enjoyment of the common sort in *King Lear* as there is in a shattering spiritual experience of our own ; though we may come to look back on both with gratitude for the wisdom they have brought us. Incidentally, the due interpretation of such art will purge the interpreters with mental and emotional and physical exhaustion too. It demands from them an extraordinary self-devotion. Its greatest effects may be within their reach, but will always be a little beyond their grasp. Actors and singers are brought to the point where they forget themselves and we forget them. And beyond that boundary—it may happen to some of us a dozen times in a lifetime to cross it—we are for a crowning moment or so in a realm of absolute music and of a drama that Shakespeare's genius will seem to have released from all bonds. I say that we must not look for perfect performances of such plays, for there is nothing so finite as perfection about them. They have not the beauty of form and clarity of expression which distinguish Racine and his great Greek exemplars. But, in virtue of a strange dynamic force that resides in them, they seem to surpass such perfection and to take on something of the quality of life itself. And they do this the more fitly, surely, in that they demand to be

are to tell our students of to-day that they can hear it on the gramophone ! It is not by such creaking methods that artistic tradition is handed on.

interpreted in terms of life itself, through the medium of living men and women. Therefore, while we arrive at no perfection in their performance, there need be practically no limit to, nor any monotony in the inspiration actors can draw from them. And their essential technique is likely to lie in the fruitfulness and variety of the means by which the significance of human relations—of men towards each other, of man to the invisible—is revealed. Shakespeare did certainly develop a medium of the most amazing resource and pliancy and power. A later theatre has made for us an illusion by which we see men as beings of another world. But he worked for an intimacy which should break the boundaries between mimic and real and identify actor and audience upon the plane of his poetic vision. Is there another art in which the world of the imagination can be made so real to us and the immaterial so actual, in which, not to speak it profanely, the word can be made flesh, as in these few boldest flights of his genius?

I do not pretend that I have fathomed Shakespeare's secret; my contention is indeed that it has not been fathomed yet, and that it cannot be given to the world by such means as we have at hand. The scholar, at best, will be in the case of a man reading the score of a symphony, humming the themes. He may study and re-study a play, and ever find something new. I have seen and read *Julius Caesar* times enough, and now at the moment I am flattering myself with the discovery—though doubtless it is *not* a new one—that the decried last Act is a masterpiece. And, again, who will not confess with me that at any performance some quite unsuspected effect (unsuspected often by the interpreters themselves) may suddenly glow into life before him? For instances: the fullness of tragic irony that resides in the very meeting of the jovial sensualist Gloucester, deprived of his eyes, with Lear, the man of intellectual pride, robbed of his wits; the edge given to the tragedy in *Othello*, when he and Desdemona, on the brink of the abyss, must yet concern themselves in entertaining the Venetian envoy to dinner. These are little things; but as we saw, the great plan of the plays apart, it is the wealth of such touches, many of which can hardly be expressed in other terms than the art's own, that endow them with their abundant life.

Can the full virtue of any art be enjoyed except in its own terms? This is the crucial question. To transport Shakespeare from the world of the theatre into a vacuum of scholarship is folly. Must we say (I will not admit it) that in the theatre scholarship cannot find a place? But the conditions under which the theatre works

to-day—and always has worked in England—are no more compatible with the stricter obligations of scholarship than is any other form of journalism. The theatre to-day does much that is effective, even as many journalists write well. But if the higher tasks of literature had all to be essayed with the printer's devil as call-boy at the door, heaven help us!

And here is a high task and a hard task, and a task, as I contend, never fully attempted yet. For Shakespeare did in these greater imaginings break through the boundaries of the material theatre he knew, and none that we have yet known has been able to compass them. Can such a theatre be brought to being? How can we say till we have tried. But as Shakespeare never ceased to be the practical playwright and man of the theatre the chances are, perhaps, that it can. Only, however, I believe, by providing for some continuance of that guild of grave and sober men of reputation to whom the work was first a gift. A gift too great for them, perhaps; is it still too great a one for us? Or can we, after three centuries, amid all this tribute to Shakespeare as the marvel of our race, contrive to make his art at its noblest a living thing?

No need to discuss here how such a guild could be formed.* There are fifty ways of doing it if we had the will. But a first clause in its charter would need to secure the privilege which all good scholars claim—for its members would be scholars in their kind—that the work should be done for its own sake. It would involve hard discipline, in the re-tracing and re-treading of the road upon which Shakespeare as playwright passed and beckoned. The foundations of poetic drama, this most national of our arts, would need to be re-trodden firm. It is not in its genesis the art of slinging fine blank-verse lines together upon a printed page; it is the art of speech made eloquent by rhythm and memorable by harmony of sense and sound. Here was Shakespeare's first strength, and from this he advanced. And if we could follow him, scholars of the printed page side by side with scholars of the spoken word, it might be that we could enter in and occupy that still mysterious country of his highest art, where he brings his vision of things good and evil, big and little, to pour them—as for their valuing all things in the world must be poured—into the crucible of human nature, and in that living form, for a symbol, lets his vision abide.

